

Effort to mend a violent reputation

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Brazil has a well-deserved reputation as one of the most violent nations in the world. Between 1993 and 2003, the average number of people killed each year from gunshot wounds was 32,555, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco). That surpassed the annual number of deaths in conflicts in Chechnya, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, Algeria and even the first Gulf war.

It is an expensive business. The violence cost the country R\$92bn in 2004, or about 5 per cent of gross domestic product, according to a study released last year by the government's Research Institute for Applied Economics (IPEA). But while these numbers are remarkable, recent developments suggest that all is not lost. Unexpectedly, the homicide rate is declining.

"For the first time in Brazilian history, we have had three years in which the measures of fatal violence have fallen," says Julio Jacobo Waiselfisz, author of the Violence Map, a government-sponsored study of homicides nationwide. "There is light at the end of the tunnel."

The reasons for the downward trend are varied. On a national level, a booming economy, rising wages and low unemployment mean more people have more money. And a far-reaching assistance programme that gives cash stipends to the poorest families has lifted millions of people out of poverty and given them real hope for the future. The most important factor was tighter restrictions on weapons sales, introduced in 2003, says Mr Waiselfisz, a researcher for the Latin American Information and Communications Network.

Although the vast majority of weapons in circulation are unlicensed, new legislation made it harder to legally buy arms. The government also got half a million guns off the street in a buy-back programme and it increased fines and penalties for those caught carrying unlicensed weapons.

The effects of the ban were especially noticeable in the country's most populous state, Sao Paulo. There, by not renewing gun permits, authorities reduced the number of legal weapons in circulation to about 3,000, from a previous high of 80,000.

In Rio de Janeiro, the homicide rate fell from 46.1 per 100,000 in 2002 to 39.5 per 100,000 in 2006, according to police figures. In Recife, Brazil's most violent big city, the rate went from a high of 58.9 per 100,000 in 2001 to 53.9 per 100,000 last year, again according to police numbers.

But in Sao Paulo, the state homicide rate plummeted, from 36 per 100,000 in 1999 to 11.6 per 100,000 last year. The total number of homicides in the state capital dipped below 5,000, just eight years after they were at 12,800, according Tullio Kahn, co-ordinator of planning and analysis at the Sao Paulo police department.

The gun ban, though, is just one of the reasons Sao Paulo has had particular success in fighting violence, experts and police say. Another important move was restricting late-night drinking, especially at weekends. Almost two-thirds of homicides take place near or in illegal or unlicensed bars and clubs and more than half take place between Friday night and Sunday morning. Nineteen municipalities in Sao Paulo state have limited the sale of alcohol at night and dozens of small towns across the country have followed suit.

A reduction in the amount and potency of crack cocaine has also played a role, according to Nancy Cardia, vice-co-ordinator of the Centre for the Study of Violence at the University of Sao Paulo.

Less drugs means less violence, both by addicts desperate for cash and by dealers settling scores with clients who owe them money, she says.

The police, however, claim the most important factors are the addition of 10,000 new officers since 2000 and the introduction of a new computer system called Infocrim.

A more visible police presence has acted as an effective deterrent, especially in middle-class neighbourhoods. And the Infocrim system, similar to that employed so successfully in the 1990s by Rudy Giuliani, the then mayor of New York, has helped police map crime and plan accordingly.

"Infocrim has helped us better distribute our force and that, obviously, has an effect. With Infocrim I can put police exactly where they are needed," says Pedro Luis Lopes, a police researcher who uses the programme on a daily basis.

Experts do not question the trend, but they are sceptical about how much is down to better policing. Petty crime has not fallen to nearly the same degree and police are still accused of corruption, violence and abuse of authority.

Experts warn that the number of killings will rise again if the authorities do not invest more in urban centres and renew efforts to get about 14m illegal weapons off the streets.

"In 2004, the homicide rate fell a lot, in 2005 it fell a little and in 2006 it levelled out," Mr Waiselfisz says. "My belief is that in 2007 it will start to rise again. The government needs to restart the disarmament campaign and take more action in poor communities. If it doesn't, more violence is inevitable."

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